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Social Cleavages and the Political System in Late 19th Century Italy

Franco Andreucci

Apart from rare exceptions, there are no studies in Italy on quantitative political history where the transformations of the political system, for a long or short period, have been documented and interpreted. Moreover, with the exception of the efforts of G. Sartori and P. Farneti, there are not even significant research projects on electoral history, on the structure of the political elite or on parliamentary behaviour between the 19th and the 20th centuries ¹⁾. The reasons for such a situation would open too wide of a discussion and this is not the right moment to give vent to complaints which would become real "jeremiads" ²⁾. However, due to the fact that many historians have explained this lack of studies through objective reasons, by discussing some of these justifications, it might help us to clarify the general interpretation which I am about to present.

According to Ernesto Ragionieri, one of the best known historians of modern Italy, any attempt to study the structure of the political power in order to find the complexity and the contradictions of the Italian society would be illusory because of the strongly censitaire character of the Italian electoral law which excluded lower and middle classes from the right to vote. "An examination of the social composition of the electorate and parliamentary elite - I'm quoting Ragionieri - provides useful data only for an internal analysis of the nature and characteristics of the ruling classes, especially from the point of view of their regional peculiarity ³⁾."

Giorgio Galli, a scholar who is ideologically distant from Ragionieri, writes in his work on political parties in Italian history: "The Italian parties in the period preceding the industrial take off are merely electoral committees at the periphery of the political system, and varied and heterogeneous parliamentary conglomerates at the core of the system", and in a volume of 700 pages, only 30 pages deal with the period before the end of the century ⁴⁾.

Moreover, many historians underline the problem of the so called lack of a

1) Giovanni S a r t o r i, *Il Parlamento Italiano 1946 - 1963* (Napoli 1963); Paolo F a r n e t i, *Sistema politico e società civile. Saggi di teoria e ricerca politica* (Torino, 1971).

2) Franco A n d r e u c c i et al., "I Parlamentari in Italia dall'Unità ad oggi. Orientamenti storiografici e problemi di ricerca", in: *Italia contemporanea* 154 (1984), pp. 145 - 164.

3) Ernesto R a g i o n i e r i, "La storia politica e sociale", in: *Storia d'Italia* 4 (Torino, 1976).

4) Giorgio G a l l i, *I Partiti politici* (Torino, 1974).

middle-class party, and this consideration is often related to the one which interprets the crisis of the representative system in the post war period up until the late and difficult birth of a middle-class party in the Partito nazionale fascista. They often maintain that the Parliament has never played a central role in the Italian political system and in all actuality political extraparlimentary crises are a constant factor in the Italian history.

These three considerations, are true to a great extent:

1) The Italian electoral law in its first version, between 1861 and 1882, actually gave the right to vote to less than 2,5 % of the population and even after the reform of 1882, which introduced significant corrections in a capacitaire sense, the electorate never went beyond 10 %, until 1913 (Figures 1 and 2);

2) If we consider a party as a voluntary association with a permanent character and an organizational structure geographically extending on a regional or national basis, characterized by the carrying out of a program, a constitution, formal membership, etc., it is true that a modern conservative party (Galli means this when he speaks of a middle-class party) never existed in Italy before fascism;

3) Finally, as Alfio Mastropaolo has recently maintained, if we consider Italy from the point of view of its political development, that is of the processes of State building and Nation building, there is no doubt that Italy is a truly anoma-

Figure 1

ELECTORS

Percentages 1861-1880

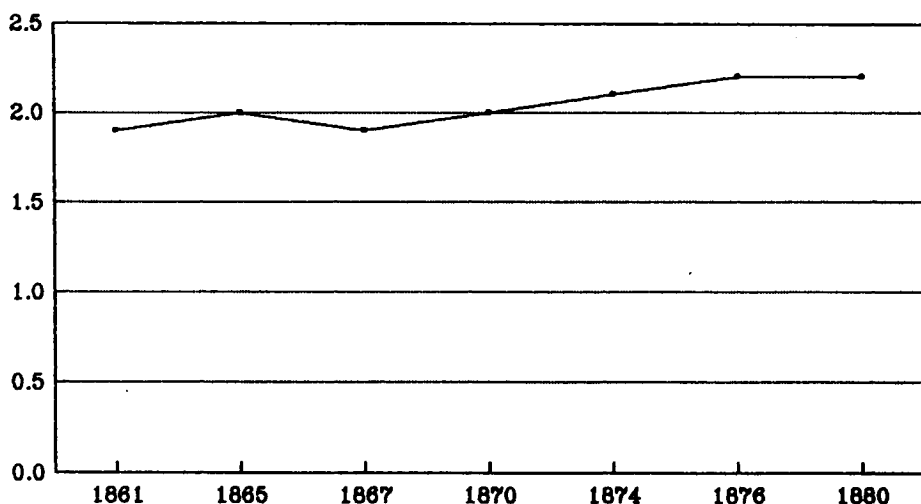
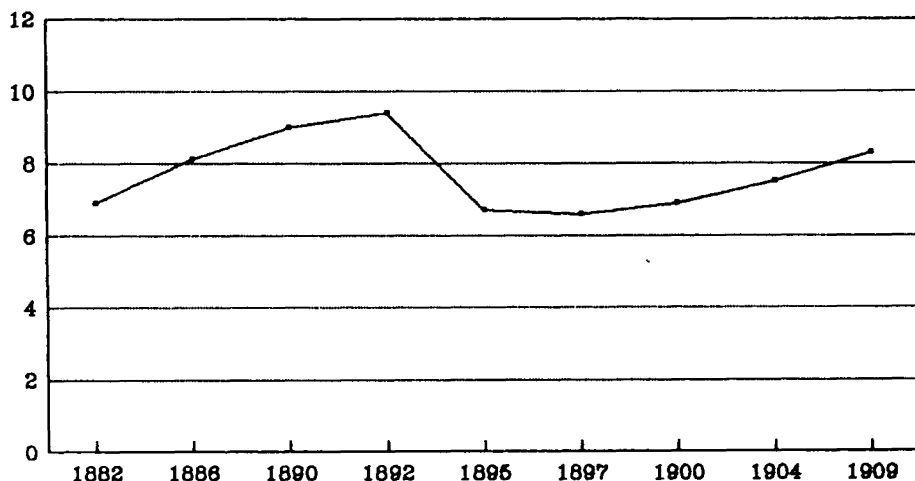


Figure 2

ELECTORS

Percentages 1882-1909



ious case, anyway, extremely different from other European models 5).

However, none of the above mentioned points actually prevents an analysis of the Italian political system in the last 40 years of the XIXth century. And the reason why a systematic research project on electoral history, on the history of political elites and on the role of Parliament is missing must be looked for elsewhere. For example in the particular ways of development of Italian historiography and in its lack of relationships with the social sciences in general. For the same reason, historians generally tend to avoid to apply any theory of political modernization to the reconstruction of Italian history at the end of the XIXth century. However, as often happens, empirical research has shown, from many points of view, a very different reality.

I would like to illustrate three points which in turn correspond to three groups of problems.

1) Through a more careful study of the participation, we can point out an electoral panorama which is more complex and extended than the one known until now, and which presents three essential aspects: a) electorate, no matter how limited, is differentiated and heterogeneous; b) there is a clear trend toward the rationalization of the electoral procedures; c) the differences in the parti-

5) *Alfo Mastroiolo*, "Sviluppo politico e Parlamento nell'Italia Liberale. Un'analisi a partire dai meccanismi della rappresentanza", in: *Passato e Presente* 12 (1986), pp. 29 - 92.

cipation between town and country show the large area covered by the patronage system.

2) Through a careful and wide analysis of the parliamentary elite it is possible to show the presence of an evident trend toward the professionalization of politics not necessarily expressed by the formation of mass political parties.

3) In the Italian political system it is possible and useful to point out the extraordinarily complex ways in which the cleavage between core and periphery is expressed.

The research project I am directing deals precisely with this set of problems; it is concerned with the collection and analysis of electoral data, data on parliamentary elite and parliamentary behaviour in Italy between 1861 and World war I.

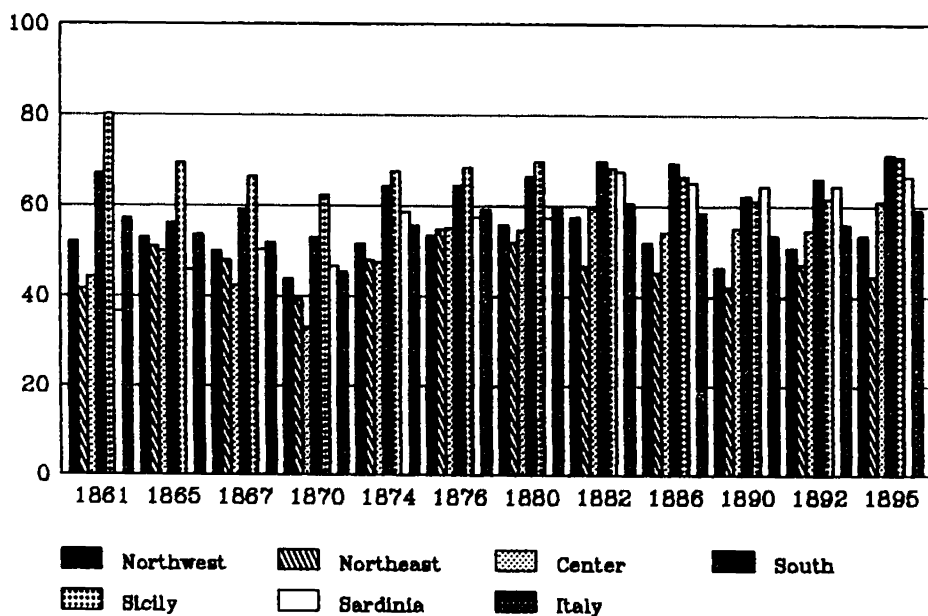
Let's begin from the first point.

1. The problem of participation is extremely complicated not only because of the difficulty in defining exactly the practical enforcement of the electoral law, but also because the ratio between the electorate and actual voters points out a very differentiated geography. The percentage of voters was always very low in Italy, fluctuating around 50 % in the first five legislatures - a situation which

Figure 3

VOTERS 1861-1895

Percentages per areas



today seems incredible, considering the typically high political participation in Italy after World War II. The regional division of the participation is particularly striking. It has its minimum in urban constituencies of Northern and Central Italy and its maximum in the rural constituencies of the South. The subcultural areas into which we usually divide modern Italy seem to be radically reversed by the statistics on the period between 1861 - 1895 (Figure 3).

In the first legislatures after 1861, in Sicily, for example in the constituencies of Comiso, Vizzini, Castelvetro of Augusta, over 90 % of the electorate voted, which was more or less the same as in Campania (for example, Afragola or Torre Annunziata), whereas in the same period in Bologna, Florence, Genoa and Milan the percentage of actual voters didn't go beyond 20 %.

The reason for such a trend is very clear and we can explain it by using a very large variety of sources. In fact, this trend reflects the phenomenology of the patronage system and the different ways of social control in town and country, North and South, core and periphery. Of course, in the constituencies where the network of the civil society was very closely woven, political independence and voting freedom were much greater than in the constituencies where the network of the civil society was loosely woven.

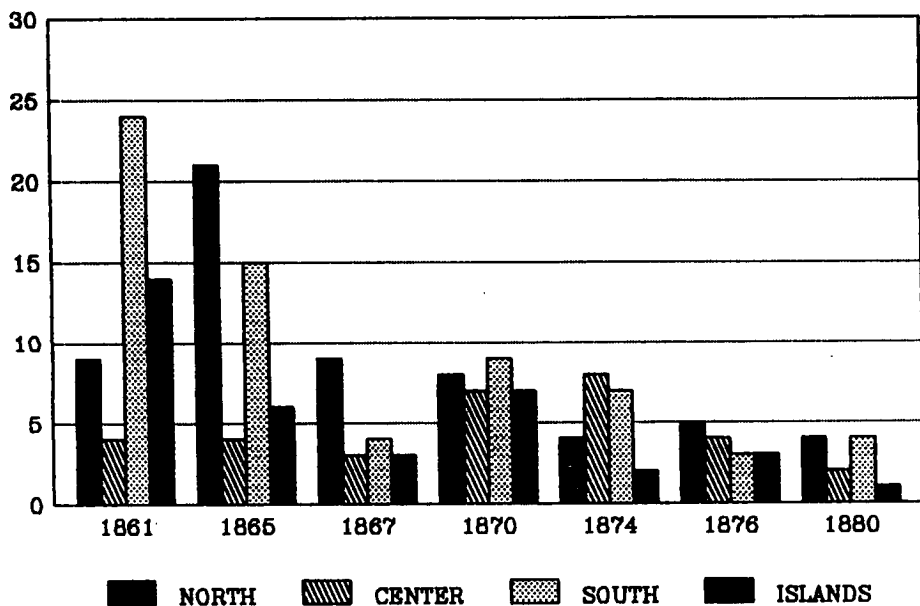
This raises immediately the other problem of the microphenomenology of the political exchange and of electoral procedures. From this point of view too, sources are very explicit. At the opening of every legislature, during the verification of electoral returns and the eligibility of the elected, parliamentary proceedings describe very clearly the principal methods of electoral corruption. The most common method was of course bribery, and large amounts of votes were literally bought through the payment of small sums of money and warm meals. Napoleone Colajanni wrote in 1898 that a vote cost half a litre of wine in the Northern countryside. This kind of typology shows very clearly a rather remarkable presence (though difficult to measure) of the lower classes in the electorate. In fact the censitaire character of the Italian electoral law was, as mentioned before, very selective; but it was based on property instead of income, which gave the right of voting to several groups of poor small landowners. In 1882 the new electoral law modified the role of the notables; especially with the introduction for a brief period of time of the list-voting system, the new law turned bribery into open forms of patronage. The increase of the participation, the decrease of rigging elections and a less remarkable difference between the electoral behaviour of urban and rural constituencies indicate, in any case, a tendency similar to those stressed in many models of political modernization (Figure 4).

2. The analysis of the political elite also points out a set of interesting problems. If we apply some of the most common indicators normally used to measure the mechanism of professionalization of politics and the correspondence of the cleavages of the society with parliamentary representation, we find a poli-

Figure 4

IRREGULAR ELECTIONS

Number per areas



tical elite which is very different from that normally shown in scholarly research. From this point of view, as we shall see, the formation of a middle class party as a necessary phase in the democratization of the Italian political system is a much less serious problem: in fact it is very clear that the Italian political elite consolidated its own professionalization in many different ways, reaching - according to Paolo Farneti - "the functional alternatives to the political party" 6).

Let's reflect on certain points.

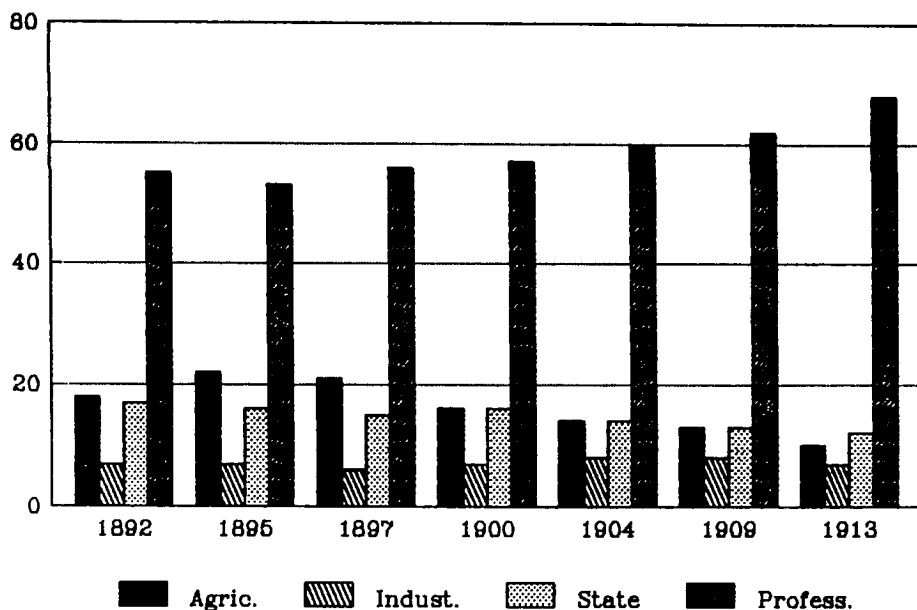
First of all, it is fairly evident that through the association of two facts, that of the high parliamentary continuity and the other concerning the larger representation of lawyers and journalists, a professional parliamentarianism which anticipates the professional politician was forming in Italy at the end of the nineteenth century. Such a panorama becomes more and more complex if we take into account the way in which the parliamentary elite reflects, in general, the cleavages of the Italian society and in particular the two basic cleavages, town and country, and core/periphery (Figures 5 and 6).

6) P. Farneti, *Sistema politico*, p. 115.

Figure 5

PROFESSIONS OF MPs

Percentages per economic activities



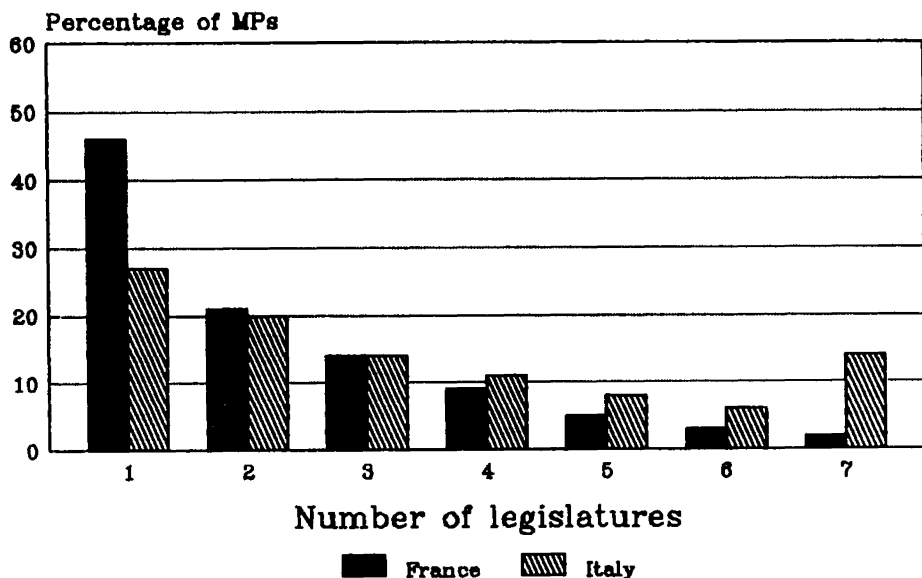
As it is known, the problem of the relationship between town and country might be seen from three points of view: that of the electorate, that of the political elite and that of the formation of political subcultures 7).

In the period between 1870 - 1880, the electors were subdivided according to the chart shown in the figure 7.

As one can see, a rural electorate, especially in the North of the country was evident in particularly relevant proportions. At the same time the political elite which was elected in the same period had a prevalently urban character, and was born and lived in the city. At the end of the century, according to the estimates of Farneti, eighty percent of the population which lived in a milieu with less than twenty thousand inhabitants produced little more than thirty percent of the political elite; on the contrary, the other two-thirds of the political elite was formed and came out of an urban milieu. It can probably be found in these characteristics one of the most peculiar features of the Italian political system: in a period characterized by such a relevant displacement of resources from the primary to the secondary sector, a political elite which was both urban

7) Cf. Mattei Dogan, "Political Ascent in a Class Society: French Deputies, 1870 - 1958", in: D. Marvick (ed.), *Political Decision Makers* (Glencoe, 1961), pp. 57 - 90.

Figure 6 **PARLIAMENTARY SENIORITY**
France (1870-1940) Italy (1892-1913)



Sources: Dogan 1961, p.58; Farnetti, p.187

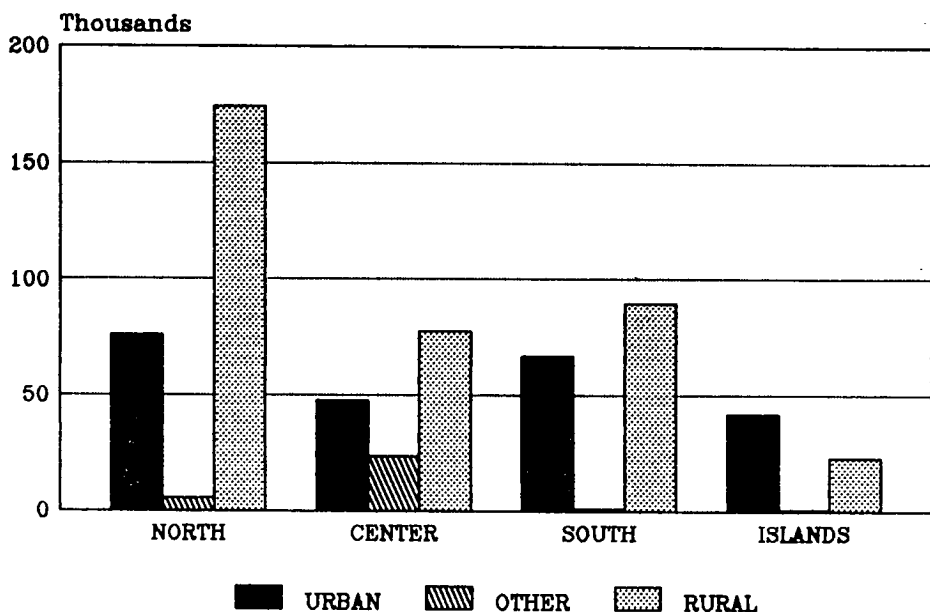
and made up of professionals drew the majority of its support from rural areas but it was not able to control the social conflicts between peasants and landowners as demonstrated by the frequent rural riots in late nineteenth century Italy. From this point of view the limited suffrage ended up by an incomplete democratization.

3. The last point that I would like to discuss regards the problem of the relationship between core and periphery which, in Italy between 1860 and the end of the century, can be expressed empirically as the "southern question".

The first contradictory point is represented by the fact that if we consider - on the basis of certain indicators of Stein Rokkan - the South as a social and economic periphery, we find ourselves in front of a situation where the electoral participation is extraordinarily high, higher than in the North. The well-known process of "meridionalizzazione della burocrazia" (the southernization of the bureaucracy) which developed, above all in the age of Giolitti and during fascism, hadn't really begun in the seventies and eighties, and in fact, for the upper southern social classes, a political career was the only way to enter into the leadership of the civil society. This would also explain the particular character of permanent support to the government majorities which the group of

Figure 7

NUMBER OF ELECTORS 1870-1880 per urban and rural communities



southern legislators had, and its strong parliamentary continuity. All of these elements when put together with the two other characteristics of southern representation, its strongly urban character and the fact that the majority of the southern legislators were elected and residents in the constituency where they were born, are part of what goes into explaining the fundamental characteristics of Southern patronage. In fact, recent studies vividly document this microphenomenology as well as the concrete content of the political exchange process. From this point of view, the problem of the failure of democratization of the Italian political system would become that of the failure of the emancipation from the factual power relationships in the civil society. I would like to underline, as in the research project which I am now directing, that this point constitutes an element of permanent continuity in the Italian political system.